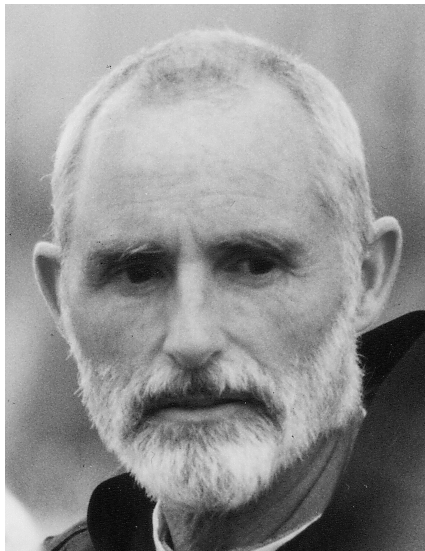


'Aware and Awake and Alive': An Interview about Thomas Merton with Brother Paul Quenon

*Conducted and edited by George A. Kilcourse, Jr
Transcribed by Susan Merryweather*



Brother Paul Quenon

Paul Quenon, a native of Fairmont, West Virginia, entered the Abbey of Gethsemani in 1958 shortly after graduating from high school. His two-year novitiate was under Thomas Merton as Novice Master, Fr James Connor as Undermaster, and Abbot James Fox. He studied philosophy with Dan Walsh for three years; Fr Flavian Burns and later Fr John Eudes Bamberger were his Junior Masters at the monastery.

Brother Paul received a Masters Degree in Systematic Theology at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, and spent three years in Nigeria teaching and helping at Awlum Monastery. He served ten years as Junior Master, and currently is Director of Education at the Abbey of Gethsemani.

He has published two books of poetry: *Terrors of Paradise* (1995) and *Laughter, my Purgatory* (2002). His anthology of poetry, *Smaller than God* (2001) was co-edited with John B. Lee, and his collection of stories, *Holy Folly* (1998), was co-authored with Fr Timothy Kelly and Brother Guerric Plante. All of these are published by Black Moss Press in Windsor, Ontario. He is co-editing an annual literary volume called *Monkscrip* (2002) published by Fons Vitae in Louisville, KY. He photographs in 35-mm format and has exhibited his work in universities and galleries in Chicago, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, Columbus OH, Louisville and Lexington KY.

Brother Paul is past and present member of the board of the International Thomas Merton Society and of the Thomas Merton Foundation. He is facilitator for the Merton Chapter at Gethsemani, and for the Cistercian Lay Contemplatives. In May 2002 he was one of the facilitators at the Merton Pilgrimage to Prades, France, sponsored by Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, British Columbia. His daily jobs in the monastery include cooking, telephone installation, gardening, teaching and singing as Cantor.

Kilcourse: Brother Paul, even before you came to the Abbey, it's possible that you might have known some of Thomas Merton's work. Had you read any of Merton's writings before you entered the Abbey of Gethsemani?

Quenon: The only book by Thomas Merton I'd read before entering Gethsemani was *The Seven Storey Mountain*,¹ and it was a book that led me to Gethsemani. Other books had led me to monasticism but *The Seven Storey Mountain* led me to Gethsemani. First of all, it made me aware that there was a monastery in the United States, and it was a book which showed me that a person can be a modern man and at the same time be a monk. So that got me over a hump. Even though I was very young, I was wondering if this was something that could still be done without seeming like you were in a bygone age and a foreign country. When I talked to Fr Louis about reading *The Seven Storey Mountain*, he said, 'How did you like it?' And I said, 'Well, it was a bit long in the middle'. He gave a look and was a bit amused, but he might have been a little bit put off by that.

1. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1948).



(Left to right) Thomas Merton; Carolyn, Josephine, Eileen and Paul Quenon at Abbey of Gethsemani; tobacco barn – Summer 1959.

Kilcourse: Describe for us your first meeting with Merton.

Quenon: My first meeting was in the retreat house. I was told that the Novice Master would come to meet me, and this rather heavy-set man, who seemed pretty old to me, came in. I figured he must be 65, although actually he was only about 43 at the time. He didn't ask too many questions. He didn't seem to be probing much. He seemed to be more interested in getting me into the flow of things. And he said, 'Tomorrow we'll be going out in the woods and cutting down some trees'. That visual way of talking was characteristic of him, and it should have been a clue right away that he was Thomas Merton, but I didn't recognize him. He was just the Novice Master to me.

Things went on for about a month, and I had no idea that the Novice Master was Thomas Merton until somebody told me. I was very happy it happened that way because by then I had established a relationship based on the fact that he was my Novice Master and not a famous writer, whom I had read already. That continued to be the nature of the relationship, and it was always in the forefront. Occasionally we might talk about something he'd written and maybe sometimes he would share something he had written. But it was very much a secondary thing.

Kilcourse: So, you knew him as Fr Louis?

Quenon: As Fr Louis.

Kilcourse: And 'Thomas Merton' was the public dimension.

Quenon: And his public dimension was really a different part of his personality, a different part of his life. His style of writing is quite different from his style of speaking when he's giving a conference, and then, again, from his style of conversation.

Kilcourse: Merton was your Novice Master, and Novice Masters in those days had more than one task with the novices. I know it included teaching, but could you just say something about how you experienced him as Novice Master.

Quenon: The Novice Master was the most important thing about the relationship. Teacher was really secondary. He was good at teaching, but the primary thing was that you related to somebody who was really your spiritual director. It was more a disciple relationship — as a disciple rather than a relationship as a student — and there was a certain level of trust that you had to have and a kind of intimacy. You disclosed something of your own spiritual struggles, an opening of the heart, where you talked about how you think God is working in your life. Or what God wants for you, what is my vocation, do I really belong here? What has been my experience in growing up? These are all things that you have to discuss. Things a teacher does not know except accidentally. But this is the essential part of being a Novice Master.

Kilcourse: So, the word 'Master' really describes master-disciple?

Quenon: Yes, the vocabulary now is tending toward Novice 'Director', but that really guts it of its spiritual element. I know the domination paradigm is to be avoided. Nevertheless there is something about the figure of a spiritual master in a sense that he has mastered his art, like a master craftsman. A spiritual master is somebody who has spiritual maturity, experience and wisdom, and can communicate that to you. Or at least can bring it to bear on guidance for your soul in your vocation.

Kilcourse: You mentioned Merton being your spiritual director. Without prying into any of the confidential sessions, could you tell us something about his style or manner of direction, his special gifts in spiritual direction?

Quenon: His manner was casual and practical. He would ask you how you were doing at work, what's it like in choir, how do you like choir, what'd you think of that talk in chapter the other day. Just incidental things, what's going on in the monastery and what's going on in your life. You would go from there into deeper things.

The superficial conversation could go on for quite a while sometimes, and often it wasn't until near the end, when the bell was going to ring for Compline, that I would bring up something important. Then we would have to stay and miss Compline. I don't think he minded that too much. He said I would 'bring the rabbit out of the hat at the very end', so that became a habit. I found a lot of times that he could read my heart, and this is 'discernment of spirit', which the Desert Fathers talk about. He could read me in a way I couldn't read myself. He understood me better than I understood myself sometimes, and that was a bit unsettling. I certainly couldn't understand *him*. I often found myself trying to understand what he's telling me, and it wasn't until maybe after a year that I could really begin to understand.

Kilcourse: He seemed to have a lot of contact by mail that was 'virtual' spiritual direction. Any particularly memorable people in that category?

Quenon: I didn't know what was going on with the other novices, except incidentally. Sometimes he didn't find it too easy to relate to some of the other novices, and I might hear a crack or two about that. There were people who were writing to him. I got very little exposure to that, except one time there was this buzz going around in the monastery about something that had happened. I walked by the Undermaster's room, and the word 'miracle' was mentioned. I began to make connections of what was actually going on, and here's the story as I can remember it: one morning at the end of the Novices' Mass I saw Fr Louis open the tabernacle and place an envelope, letter size, inside. He held it between his index finger and second finger and with his left hand placed it vertically inside the curtain. Then closed the door and finished Mass. I wasn't sure if that was a strange thing for a priest to do or not. Maybe there was some sort of blessing he wanted on this letter before he sent it.

Later that afternoon, or the day after, I went to the chapel for a visit. When I entered there was a flapping of wings as a bird flew from the altar out the front window on the left. I went to Fr Tarcissius, the Undermaster, and told him a bird got into the chapel, and screens should be put on the windows. He said there are screens. I said, but not on the front two windows. When I went back, I saw they were sealed shut and never *were* opened.

At a conference following, Fr Louis asked if anyone knew what became of the letter he had put in the tabernacle. No one answered. It didn't seem right to me that anyone, at least not a novice, should be fooling around with the tabernacle unless he was sacristan. And the sacristan, Fr David, had nothing to say.

A week or so later I passed the Undermaster's office and overheard something the two or three novices there were saying about 'a miracle'. I wasn't inclined to give attention to talk about miracles. I was grateful I hadn't heard much talk like that here yet. I supposed there was a lot of that sort of talk among the Brother Novices, and I was a little concerned it might be creeping over into the Choir Novitiate. So I walked past the door without giving pause.

Then at the next conference Fr Louis said a woman he knew had been in a crisis. He read a letter from her that started out by saying: 'I don't know how your letter, which was not postmarked, got here. I found it on the table when I walked into the house...' Then she expressed how it came at just the right time when she was in such darkness, etc. Fr Louis didn't say how it got there either. Later, in spiritual direction, when I tentatively brought up the letter in the tabernacle, Fr Louis said we don't need to think about that too much. Christ can take care of these things.

Accordingly, I more or less forgot about these things. But now that so much else has been written about Fr Louis, I consider this too ought to be included.

Kilcourse: It's been said that Merton had a profound influence on a generation of novices at Gethsemani. Many of those went on themselves to become abbots in the various communities. He certainly exercised an important office as Novice Master and earlier as Master of Scholastics at the Abbey. Paul, you've developed into a fine poet and photographer. These were two artistic expressions that Merton cultivated so fruitfully. I doubt that Merton could sing as well as you. You are a fine cantor at the monastery, but how has his influence stimulated your gifts as poet and photographer.

Quenon: He stimulated me more by example than by direct effort. There was only one time I remember when we did something artistic together. Somebody had brought a can of beer into his office and left it there. He invited me in and we split the beer and drew pictures. After that he posted them up on the bulletin board and said, 'There were two Russian artists here last night, Popov and Chekov'. I did write a poem when I was a novice and he liked it. He put it up on the board, and nothing

much happened after that. I didn't do a whole lot of writing until after he died.

A person has to die before you inherit something of that spirit which moves them. I sometimes made an effort to develop my imagination in the context of my spiritual life. That's one of Merton's chief qualities as a person, that he was a man of the imagination as well as the spirit. He was aware and awake and alive in his imagination and considered that to be an important part of his spiritual life. So I've emulated that example. I would go around seeing things, angles, just the quality of light at certain times of the day, and how a certain configuration of space and objects can be very beautiful. But I didn't try to capture any of this until I started using a camera 30 years later.

Kilcourse: So, it wasn't imitation in a non-flattering way. You weren't trying to become a latter-day Thomas Merton poet-photographer, but it was the fact that you lived life with that kind of intensity. You wanted to live as intensely as he had.

Quenon: Yes, I would say that. He almost had to be out of the way before I could do it. I couldn't feel my own space, I didn't feel I was somehow out from under his critical gaze until after he was gone. Then I was working from within, so to speak.

Kilcourse: Do you remember anything vivid about your relationship with Merton and your friendship and communication?

Quenon: He would be more perceptive about me than I was about myself, and that would cause some tension. I never felt totally comfortable with him. He was a man with a gift of words and could use words quite pointedly, but he was also a man who was non-verbal in his ways of communication. He could penetrate through a smokescreen of words and leave you on the spot and knock you to another level of experience, where you had to cope with things without controlling them and rationalizing.

I remember one morning, within the first three months of my novitiate, when I went outside to the wall behind the novitiate, overlooking the valley. The sky was incredibly blue, and everything exquisitely fresh. My senses were cleansed by the rigor of our life and intensified by my budding manhood. Everything in that quiet moment was more vivid than I ever knew before.

I strolled around the corner and Fr Louis came by. He saw immediately into my soul and looked pleased. But when I saw that he saw, I was made self-conscious. He immediately saw that change come on and his

look turned dark. This must have been a moment of what the Desert Fathers called 'discernment of spirit'. For me it was too much a moment of being obvious. So much happening without exchange of words was unsettling.

Later he complained to me of my being too self-conscious. I wasn't sure which phase of that meeting he was talking about—the before or the after. And shortly, he made complaint that I used words to control the situation. I felt, in fact, small confidence embarking on a sea of non-verbal communication in unfamiliar relationships. It was struggle enough just to get the verbal part right.

At home, Mother could read my mind, and I would read hers without even knowing it. And having a twin sister involved much the same.

Another time, he was at work with the novices in the woods. I was standing a while worried over private things a young man is likely to be worried about. He saw me, squeezed his eyes shut and burst out: 'I'm never going to do that ever again'—as if reading my own thoughts. I was astonished. It startled me and broke the spell of the moment, but it didn't resolve my worry. Maybe I was becoming addicted to worry. And, moreover, I wasn't sure I wanted to be that easy to read.

I resist speaking about the following episode; perhaps it should be left alone and there is no business my putting it into words. But if I speak about Merton as I knew him I might as well go all the way. The blocks against the non-verbal busted soon enough. I had a dream, or something of the sort, since it started out with what seemed like a real shout from Fr Louis' side room adjacent to the dormitory. I got up and ran to the socket in the wall and pulled out a plug. In reality there was no socket and no plug in that wall. I told Fr Louis that dream the next day. He said, 'You saved my life'. Then he told me he'd had a dream that he was electrocuted, he was lying on the floor in a room surrounded by monks and nuns and some big-wigs, and the Primate of the Benedictines was there. The coincidence of our dreams annoyed me and seemed pretty special. It never happened again.

The recollection of this incident in 1958 after his death in 1968 disturbed me. I was inclined to disbelieve it. I was uncertain whether I was remembering something, or just making it up in my imagination—a way of filling in the gaps of what was a sudden and shocking end. His death was terribly significant in many ways, for me a joyful experience, and I felt his presence in a new and closer way. But the dream episode seemed too much like a way of fitting together pieces of a puzzle.

Now after years of distance from the death I feel free to revisit the novitiate days on their own terms. And there I find this memory recognizable on its own terms as a memory. And with it some subsequent

effects it had on Fr Louis. He took this incident or coincidence as something needing attention. Perhaps it was a confirmation of his own dream he suspected was significant. I am not sure how much attention he paid it. He must have prayed over it. And it might also have given him pause about why I was in the monastery at all.

He asked me, 'Are you staying here for my sake?'

I said, 'No, I want to be a monk'.

Later, he read to me an answer to a letter he wrote to 'a prophet', some friend who he said had that kind of grace. The tone of the letter was garrulous and lengthy. Fr Louis read it with laughter, especially at the point where he warned Fr Louis that his prophet there at the monastery is immoral and 'he should not be trusted for what he does when he goes out into the woods' — or something to that effect. I was not sure how I fitted into that picture at all, but I was not as willing to dismiss the suggestion as ludicrous as Fr Louis seemed to be. After that, there was no more mention of the subject, and we just took it for what it was or might be, and left it at that — *he*, I presume, out of faith, *me*, out of a desire to avoid a false faith.

It was at this time, either before or after, maybe both, when Fr Louis spoke about the complaints that individuals make about our sermons in Chapter being so dull and windy. He said that the sermon a priest gives should be like a shout that a man standing outside a burning house makes to the people inside to get out. I was reluctant to pursue the thought of how he might apply that. Was it a shout to get out of the monastery which was as good as doomed? I was focused on trying to get in. Or did it speak to my own thought to get out of the Catholic church, which sometimes seemed fatally constricted. Either interpretation was too narrow. His explanation used words such as 'eschatological', 'a different kind of world' and so forth. A shout to escape this world based upon illusion.

There was one more time when I heard a shout in the night. It was a day or two before 10 December 1968, when Fr Louis died in Bangkok. I was awakened by the voice, which I identified as the same voice who spoke to us in Chapter. I thought of running down to see him, but as I came to my senses I realized that was impossible. Fr Louis still had to be in Bangkok. The shout awakened me to a world that seemed vital and full. Coming to my senses seemed a turn toward a world that was dull, gray, half alive. All was quiet in the dormitory. I did not rouse myself. But I could not get back to sleep. Eventually the Tower bell struck two o'clock. Next day no one seemed to have heard the noise. Brother Benedict suggested I might have heard Brother Nivard. But it didn't sound like Nirvard to me.

When reports of Fr Louis' death came in, they told of how someone heard a shout. A couple of monks came to his door. They knocked but there was no answer. The door was locked. Over the door was a louvre. They climbed, pushed it open and looked in. He was lying under the fan electrocuted. The fan was still plugged into the wall. Before long the room was full of monks and nuns, dignitaries and the Abbot Primate of the Benedictines, Rembert (later Archbishop) Weakland.

There was another shout: the body was returned to Gethsemani a week later. According to ritual practice, the community gathers in the cloister to receive the body and accompany it into church. I had set up a loud speaker and microphone for the prayers. The wires were looped through a window into the chapter room, where the amplifier was located. When the hearse arrived I hurried into the chapter room to turn it on and adjust the volume. The moment the coffin was brought into the cloister I carelessly stepped on the microphone wire and it let out a great yelp. The rapture of silence, at such a grave moment, seemed raw, absolutely crude. But its significance was immediately evident to me. It announced his arrival, an echo of his cry of departure. When Christ gave up his spirit on the cross, he cried with a loud voice. It was a jolt to awareness.

The coffin was moved down the cloister, a smooth, gray form and came to rest below the sanctuary, a small beached whale. The lid was never opened and the funeral began immediately. Fr Flavian, who presided as Abbot, had seen it opened for identification at the morgue. The sight must have still been with him. He had turned a color I had never seen him before or afterward. He turned pink. The moment was pivotal in his whole career. The Cellar, Brother Clement, who was also there, said the decay was so advanced he would not have been able to recognize Fr Louis. Fr John Eudes, our house physician, confirmed the identification by looking at his teeth.

The day was misty and there was a slight drizzle falling on the cemetery. The moment before the coffin was lowered Fr Eudes kissed his fingertips and lay it on the head of the coffin. After it was lowered, and time came for the first shovels of dirt to be thrown in, Fr Flavian turned to Fr Raymond to begin it. Fr Raymond stood still and would not move. Fr Flavian motioned him again to begin. Reluctantly, he took a shovel, and the dirt and stones landed with a loud clunk on the metal coffin.

Afterwards, I climbed the red cedar by the grove to remove the loud speaker. I had to put my arms around the tree to untie it and the fragrance close to my face was sweet.

Kilcourse: You spent time in Africa, Paul, teaching there. Could you tell us something about that experience? Would it be accurate to say that Merton's global consciousness might have played a role in that?

Quenon: I went to Africa primarily to teach. I went to Africa to help at another monastery. I was at a place in my life where I needed to help and be of help. I had personal reasons, too. I wanted to have an experience of monasticism in another context, away from the middle-class, bourgeois American standard of living and its culture, the affluence and the materialism, which Merton had criticized so pointedly. I thought it would be a wholesome thing to be able to work from the ground up and go back to the elemental things about struggle for existence and living in a foreign country and trying to start a new monastery.

This monastery I went to was just in its beginning phases. It had been in existence five years by then. That's Awlum in Anambra state, Nigeria. When I got there, of course, they were quite aware of Gethsemani. They had read Thomas Merton, and they saw him as a man of truth who would speak directly. I suppose part of it was his civil rights position which might have won their hearts. But what really won their hearts was that he spoke the truth and that he was talking about things of God and things of the spirit. They didn't find him hard to understand. He's an intellectual and many people find him hard to understand. For some reason these Nigerians who were not well educated (they only had six years of schooling) didn't seem to have that problem.

Kilcourse: Were they reading him in translation?

Quenon: They were reading him in English. It had been a British colony so in one degree or another they knew English. Merton was very interested, of course, in Third World countries and had done some writing with regard to cargo cults² in New Guinea. He wrote primarily to show what the impact of modern culture has on these primitive societies. I think that's still a neglected area of Merton's studies—how he perceived these archaic cultures (I wouldn't want to call them primitive, but they are ancient cultures). What effect are we having on them, and what they can give to us? Merton's *Ishi Means Man*,³ for instance, is another essay about this topic.

2. Thomas Merton, 'Cargo Theology', in *idem, Love and Living* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), pp. 80-94.

3. Thomas Merton, *Ishi Means Man* (Greensboro, NC: Unicorn, 1976).

I think that monasticism is a universal phenomenon, and it can be new wherever it is. The real growth in the order now is in the Third World countries. Monasticism is not dying. It's actually growing, but growing in different parts of the world than we're familiar with: not Europe, not America, not Japan, not any of the affluent countries, but in Africa, in Southeast Asia and South America.

Kilcourse: Are they going to come and evangelize us?

Quenon: I hope they will. They are at a place in their cultural development where monasticism has a function of transition. These archaic cultures are very much community-oriented. People think and work together. They feel things together. Monasticism has a very strong communal character to it, and yet it's oriented not just to the life of the community but to higher consciousness: prayer, meditation, and so forth. It has a very strong appeal to people in these Third World countries, who are still struggling for survival and still know how to bond together, to try to work together on things. It's not always easy to strive towards spiritual goals.

Kilcourse: We would be lucky if we could retrieve that in the West. We may do it through their example.

Quenon: I'm not sure what's going to happen in the West. I think there might be a return to a need for community. We've become disillusioned with mass culture. We're aware now that we need to break down into local communities, have more local responsibilities for things. It's very much a struggle to do that. Monasticism is a model of how that can be successfully done.

As we develop electronic media—the computer and so forth—you don't need to go to a mall to shop anymore. You can stay up in your mountain chalet, take care of business, shopping, and just about everything else. Why not have small communities living in these 'hollers', valleys, self-contained units, yet not really self-contained because they are connected through electronic media to everything else in the world? There can be a very strong local community of responsibility, of experience of joy and celebration.

Kilcourse: You've just given us a new definition of a global village.

Quenon: The global village will look more fragmented, but at the same time there will be this kind of virtual web, which ties it all together. We

have to respect the local communities, and that's where we're still lacking. Monasticism can be a model of that. Arnold Toynbee said that in the future society will be patterned after the example of monasteries. That still remains to be seen, but it's a nice aspiration, I think.

Kilcourse: Talking about the Third World and monasteries, one of the links that you can give to our readers is the person of Ernesto Cardenal, who came to Gethsemani while you also were a novice there and certainly had an influence on Merton. He was a conduit for some of his reading of the Latin American and Central American poets. What can you say about Cardenal as a person and his importance in Merton's life? I know that you've included some of Cardenal's work in the most recent collection, *Smaller than God*.⁴

Quenon: Yes, he was very gracious to let us use a poem, several poems from the *Trappist, Ky*.⁵ collection which he had written at the monastery. Merton describes them like Chinese paintings or Zen calligraphies. They were short and allusive. Of course, Ernesto Cardenal was just Frater Lawrence to me. He was ornery, he was this middle-aged man who was short and walked with a long stride and had a big nose and couldn't speak English very well. We didn't think of him as anything special except that he was different. He used to tease the novices, particularly one or two who were most teaseable. He would set them up, and then they would get back at him.

His background history only came through gradually in the sense that Fr Louis would say something about a friend of Frater Lawrence's being tortured in Nicaragua. 'Pray for him'. They'd make him drink a lot of water, tied off his penis, and then beat his bladder. That sort of thing. When that was happening, I remember going out to the garden after Mass one day. Half a dozen novices were making their thanksgiving in silence, as we regularly did, and Frater Lawrence was sitting there on the bench. The whole garden just seemed to be filled with this agony. I noticed everybody else started leaving. I stayed there, not too far away, and had this sense of this pain just hanging in the air. I guess the pain was eventually getting to Lawrence because he had to leave. He also had an ulcer problem, a sign that maybe he wasn't really made for a life at Gethsemani, too much tension. I'm sure it was his concern about the situation in Nicaragua.

4. *Smaller than God: Words of Spiritual Longing* (ed. Br Paul Quenon and John B. Lee; Windsor, ONT: Black Moss Press, 2001).

5. Ernesto Cardenal, *Trappist, Ky*. (Bloomington, IN: Iron Bird, 2002).

I did get a sense that Fr Louis very much respected him and admired him as a poet. I asked if there ever would be any classes on poetry, and he said, 'Well, if we're going to have any classes on poetry, it would be Frater Lawrence who ought to give it and I would attend it. I myself would like to hear a class he would give on poetry'.

Kilcourse: He also did some plaster art.

Quenon: Oh, yes, he was working on these concrete pourings. He would use sand and scoop out a figure in the sand and then pour concrete into it. That's how he did a couple of crosses, and he did some plaster castings, one of St Thérèse and one of Mary and one corpus for a wooden cross.

Kilcourse: Merton was quite fond, wasn't he, of the crucifix that Ernesto created?

Quenon: Yes, yes, he did a crucifix. He did a crucifix for each cell in the dormitory. That was a ceramic pouring, with a very thin, worm-like corpus on it.

Kilcourse: There's been considerable writing about Merton's poetry, but much of that so-called scholarly writing shies away from evaluating Merton's poetry. A lot of it examines sources or influences on Merton or maybe a textual criticism of the poem, but not an analysis of it as poetry. Would you venture to say something about the quality of Merton's poetry as poetry?

Quenon: You would expect somebody in a monastery would be writing a very spare kind of poetry, haiku things, and expressing simplicity and poverty and clarity and the minimalist kind of form that you would associate with monastic culture. But Merton was just the opposite. He had a rather prolix poetic style, almost leaning toward the congested, a plentitude of imagery, and ways of using words which would be surprising. His vocabulary sometimes would send you to the dictionary. You don't know quite where 'this word' came from. I suppose that too is part of the conditioning of a monastery. When you're living in a very simplified environment then you compensate by having a florid interior life. Your imagination makes up for what's lacking exteriorly.

Maybe Merton's poetry is not evaluated because it eludes evaluation, it's not the kind of poetry that you can go 'ooh!' and 'ahh!' over. On the other hand you have to respect it because it's beyond you. At least, that's

my feeling, it was always somewhat beyond me. Here's something I can't take as trite or too facile. It can be difficult at times. To be difficult is not necessarily to be a good poet. Sometimes that's as much of a fault as an asset. He did get into simpler style in his middle period, that is, in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Kilcourse: It becomes really obvious in *Emblems of a Season of Fury*.⁶ The poetry is lean. It's even angular.

Quenon: And that part I find most accessible. People like his early poetry the best, but I don't think it's necessarily the best poetry. It's too predictable, in a sense. For that time it wasn't predictable, it probably sounded very fresh. His later poetry again moves into a different mode.

Kilcourse: Are you talking about *Cables*⁷ and *The Geography of Lograire*?⁸

Quenon: Yes, *Cables* and *The Geography of Lograire*.

Kilcourse: How do you see those two ambitious poems? Certainly *Lograire* is the most ambitious he ever attempted.

Quenon: Yes, they are ambitious and they are experimental as they are exploring new frontiers, reflecting new influences. He didn't feel constrained by being a representative of the monastic world, and he could cut loose and follow his instincts.

Kilcourse: They are perhaps yet to really be evaluated.

Quenon: I think that could very well be true.

Kilcourse: You notice Jay Laughlin said that he thought that 50 years after Merton's death he might be remembered more for *The Geography of Lograire* than other things that he had written.

Quenon: Or maybe forgotten. It's hard to say at this point. People tend to remember the earlier poetry. Even sophisticated people who can understand things. I'm not sure later things will be remembered. The obscure 'prophetic' poetry of William Blake is largely unknown, but his simpler 'Songs of Innocence' and 'Songs of Experience' are remembered.

6. Thomas Merton, *Emblems of a Season of Fury* (New York: New Directions, 196).

7. Thomas Merton, *Cables to the Ace: Or, Familiar Liturgies of Misunderstanding* (New York: New Directions, 1969).

8. Thomas Merton, *The Geography of Lograire* (New York: New Directions, 1966).

Kilcourse: Do you see Merton's enduring influence on the traditions of monastic life as it's lived at the Abbey of Gethsemani?

Quenon: I think Merton certainly remains a presence in the monastery in ways that are more vast and profound than the new generations are aware of; things they take for granted now are really things for which he had to break the ground. He didn't leave his name labeled on these things. They're there, but people who have lived through that history know that his signature is hidden down in there somewhere.

Kilcourse: Give an example.

Quenon: For instance, the appreciation of contemplation in the monastic life. Earlier on, contemplation was not necessarily the center of focus. As a matter of fact, it was not at all the center of focus in the early phase at the Abbey of Gethsemani. Penance, keeping the rule, attending church, and singing the Psalms was the focus. Meditation was doing your devotions, reading a devotional book of meditation and then saying a prayer. Merton put everything on a deeper level and insisted that the goal of the monastic life is something beyond the observances. That then became the real focus for the renovation of the constitutions in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. I would say that's been one of Merton's chief influences.

In other ways, he now has less influence. The eremetical life is no longer an enthusiasm among monks, even the younger monks. There's not this dream to go out and live in a hermitage someday. There are fewer hermits now, at least in this country. That has crested. That's subsiding. There's more talk about community life now and avoiding individualism. Merton criticized the monastery as being too much like a corporation and a well-oiled factory, where everything's humming well. We're still pretty much into that mode. Work is very important for us. Having the system working well. That is all right if it is done with the right intentions—to free us to live the contemplative life. Merton has helped us to clarify our intentions. There's where Merton has been a plus. On the other hand, I think, there is an awful lot of focus on keeping the system running, and Merton was somewhat diffident about such things. He would just as well let them fall into shambles. Of course we can't let that happen.

Kilcourse: So he would have an anti-poem about the cell-phone at the monastery, right?

Quenon: Oh, absolutely. And about the computer. He wrote this essay about 'The Angel and the Machine',⁹ which was prophetic in showing what kind of mentality people who live with computers get into, and how it has taken the place of the angel in people's minds.

Kilcourse: The late 1960s were a remarkable time of transition in Catholicism, liturgy, ecumenism. Did any of this seem to affect the monastery in Merton's time in a way that engaged him?

Quenon: I think the liturgical renewal was already fermenting at Gethsemani before Vatican II. We had this serious interest in doing Gregorian chant. We were making recordings back in the 1950s, and there were whisperings, backroom talk, about doing liturgies in English someday. That was taken for granted, it would happen eventually. Some people wouldn't talk about it, but other people were talking about it. Fr Louis himself liked the Latin liturgy, and he retained Latin as his chosen language when he went up to the hermitage and would say the Divine Office in Latin. But he respected what we were doing. He saw it as what the younger generation wanted and what they ought to get.

Kilcourse: How did Merton react to the transitional period of liturgical change at the Abbey?

Quenon: He had a kind of no-nonsense attitude about liturgy and would express himself overtly in one way or another. I remember the Paschal fire-rite in 1968. The location of the fire was behind the church, and the procession was around the cemetery to the west. The procession was halted at the door because some lights inside were left on, and the liturgists wanted a perfectly dark church to enter with our candles.

I was in line beside Fr Louis. As the delay was prolonged he began losing patience. He began getting restless, turned, put his elbows up on the cemetery wall and looked off into the distance to the hills, disconnecting conspicuously from the slugging liturgy.

Again, the first year we used English for the Good Friday Passion, the long narration was not sung as it always had been. The only authorized translation was the New American, and it was flat and prosaic. As the three readers droned on Fr Louis grew more and more discontented. He shook his head, made a bow, turned and walked out of the church.

9. Thomas Merton, 'The Angel and the Machine', *The Merton Seasonal* 22.1 (Spring 1997), pp. 3-6.

These things were the converse side of his strong love of the liturgy, a liturgy that is well done. Well done, without becoming a performance. He prayed sometimes with uplifted spirits, most of the time with spirit collected and his feet on the ground. Such it seemed to me from brief passing glances. When things went wrong, however, he would flip over and become the liturgical bad boy.

The choir was lit by fluorescent lights – effective but not too attractive. The bulb was a yellow tint, which made it easy on the eyes. Someone complained it was too hard to read, so the bulbs were changed to white. The glare that resulted was, I thought, insupportable when they were first installed. Fr Louis arrived at Vigils, and after a psalm or two left church and returned wearing a pair of sunglasses. He continued using them unless there was daylight. A couple of days later a compromise was found. Every other light was white and every other yellow. So did it thereafter remain.

There was another incident. In the Novitiate chapel, the 'sacristy' consisted in a dresser at the rear. I was waiting there as server when he arrived for morning Mass. There was a new vestment set out for him, with an image of a burning candle. He took one look, gruffly looked at the burning candles on the altar, and made some vague gesture of discontent. Later he was to write about this as the redundancy of symbols in the liturgy.¹⁰ Why have an image of a candle on a vestment when there are already real candles on the altar?

Such questions never occurred to us who thought any pleasing image would do.

Kilcourse: What's your favorite work of Merton's?

Quenon: My favorite work of Merton's is *Raids on the Unspeakable*.¹¹ I think those are really imaginative essays. He's not promoting any particular monastic agenda – he doesn't do that in anything except as he has

10. Thomas Merton, 'Absurdity in Sacred Decoration', in *idem, Disputed Questions* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1960), pp. 264-73. See especially pp. 271-72: 'A vestment fulfills its function by being a garment. It does not have to become, at the same time, a holy picture, before it can be regarded as spiritual. Its shape, its texture, its color, all contribute far more to its 'spiritual quality' than any adventitious pictorial accretions our fancy may see fit to tack on to it. What is the source of this obsession with 'illustration' and mere pictorial decoration in sacred art? I think in part it comes from an unconscious assimilation of the commercial mentality. It comes from the fact that our minds have been corrupted by the spirit of advertising. We think in terms of trade-marks, not of symbols'. – *Editor*.

11. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (New York: New Directions, 1966).

filtered it through his own perception of things. Especially in *Raids on the Unspeakable* he's exploring new frontiers. I guess next to that would be *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*,¹² especially the section on the dawn and the third part, where he talks...

Kilcourse: 'Dawn and the Night Spirit?'

Quenon: 'Dawn and the Night Spirit', where he gets into *pointe vierge*. There's a kind of a breadth and diversity, an ecumenism to that book, which is refreshing.

Kilcourse: I too have told people that if there's a fire, I'm going to grab *Raids* first. Small as it is, it's so wonderfully exploratory. I think that's what you're talking about, too. It is broadening.

In his Bangkok address on the day of his death, Merton spoke on the kind of ferment of monastic life that since then has led to a diminishing number of monks. But he almost spoke optimistically, saying monasticism is an instinct of the human heart, it is imperishable. Do you discern signs of this ferment or any tell-tale signs of future Cistercian monastic life?

Quenon: I see a ferment going on in the Third World. In the First World, the more advanced cultures, there is a ferment going on, but it's of a different nature. I think today's challenge is working out what it is to be a monastery in a modern world, what it is to be in a symbiotic relationship with contemporary culture, economically and culturally, and yet retain monastic values, the monastic tradition and live it from day to day. That's really a challenge, and that's something we're working at very hard.

The Tibetan Buddhists are looking toward us to give them some sort of clue on how to do that because they are beginning to face it themselves, having been evicted from Tibet and living in India. There the young generation is going off to other things besides joining monasteries. So they come to Gethsemani, for instance, wanting to know about our industry. The Dalai Lama wanted to tour all our different departments—the fudge, the cheese, the fruitcake, the bakery—because they realize they're going to have to learn how to make their own living. And we've already established that. Merton was pretty sarcastic about our industries, but that's just the thing now that's a value to other traditions.

12. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).

It's some groundwork that we have done. All the monasteries in the United States and to a great extent in Europe have become independent and yet live monastic life with its liturgy, quiet and reading and meditation.

Kilcourse: So, this may ironically be the future for the autonomy of monks East and West, having their own industry, which would have been a surprise 40 years ago?

Quenon: And our autonomy is the thing that should assure our integrity because in past ages, as long as we were dependent on the nobles and the kings, we were compromised. They wanted to have their finger in how the monastery was run. And they would put their own sons in the Abbot's chair. That was the corrupt system of abbots '*in commendam*'.

Another example: when we were dependent upon the goodwill donations of the faithful there was too much of an emphasis on saying Masses, getting stipends, being super-liturgical. That created something of an imbalance in the monastic triangle of work, reading and prayer. The liturgical prayer assumed too much importance. When you're independent then you're able to get a better balance. But then the balance swings over to work. I think that's the struggle we're having now. Reading seems to be very much at risk. Although we have bigger libraries and more to read, there's less time to read.

Kilcourse: And without leisure there is no culture.

Quenon: Yes, quite so. Then we have the question what to do with computers and e-mail and Internet. Is it going to be a new form of *lectio divina*, of reading, or is it eating into it, and diluting it? So, all these things are the present ferment, and it's a very important ferment, but it's very much a test-tube process. It's not taking place on a vast scale. It's taking place in small communities. All the communities are relatively small compared to the past. And, I think, once that all gets worked out we'll be in a secure, solid position to draw in a lot of people who are looking for a balanced life and will come to us for it.

Kilcourse: Do you detect some neglected areas in Merton's studies?

Quenon: There's been so much writing on Merton. Let's start with the question, Is there a Merton cult? I think a Merton cult comes from people who don't read Merton. They just hear about him and don't really know what he stands for. He's just a figure, and a cult figure is somebody by

whom you identify yourself, rather than somebody who helps you move into your own deeper perception of things. Merton is really a gate-keeper. He should be there to move you into vaster spaces of spirit and of tradition and of other cultures of spirituality. But if you're not using him that way then he becomes a cult figure, an end in himself.

Being a cult figure is inevitable, I think, if somebody's written that much. He's like Walt Whitman. Whitman stands for a certain kind of American spirit, and people may have read very little of him, or may have read a little bit about him. Still he's kind of a touchstone, a reference point. Merton is becoming a reference point, and that's inevitable. Hopefully people will go beyond that. But it's like Dorothy Day, too, she's becoming a reference point.

Kilcourse: She's even being spoken of as a candidate for becoming a saint.

Quenon: Well, she said that would be...what's her statement? She said, 'Don't diminish me that way'.

Kilcourse: Which is the perfect comeback.

Quenon: We can diminish Merton in the same way, but I don't think he'll be canonized. There's no movement afoot to do that. He's been Merton, and simply that in itself is enough.

Kilcourse: Neglected areas in Merton's studies?

Quenon: I'm not sure there are any. All this mass of secondary literature is a result of people who read Merton and really are inspired to write. Just going to his hermitage provokes writing. People go in there and all of a sudden it starts flowing. Merton writes in such a way that things start flowing in your own mind, so we've got this great flood of secondary literature. Almost everything's been covered. What is there left to do? And yet people keep doing it in new ways. Now the challenge is to find little pockets of things that haven't been done. Maybe, as I said, what was his take on Third World cultures, the primitive cultures? That still has to be explored a bit, I think.

Kilcourse: I have a final question, Paul. As one who has learned under Merton and has lived with him, how do you think Merton should best be remembered?

Quenon: I think Merton should be remembered as a joyful person and somebody who was very much aware and awake and alive to other people's concerns. He was that way because he was so immersed in God. He realized you cannot really be immersed in God without also at the same time being self-giving towards other people. He could be very self-protective, but he was self-protective precisely in order not to trivialize his relationship with other people or let that relationship be reduced to just chatting, useless exchanges of conversations.

Fr Louis had a place in the library Grand Parlor where we hung our work clothes and boots. His name was on a block, like everyone else's in Latin: *Ludovicus*. Above that someone placed a painting after he left on the Asian trip. It was a sign in blotchy pink with the words *Deo Gratias*. It had a look of young hippy art about it, even though it was in Latin. Maybe someone meant it to be a greeting for when he returned. They are the two last words at the ending of the sacrifice of the Mass. So it remained on the wall after he died, a celebration of the Mass now ended of a priest for our time. No one removed it, or the name block, or the clothes, for a long, long time. I think a good expression of how Merton should be remembered is *Deo Gratias*.